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ABSTRACT

This document gives voice to concerns raised by critics and supporters of commercialism in schools and provides brief descriptions of several important resources on this topic. "Commercial Activities in School" (U.S. General Accounting Office) reports on the nature and frequency of commercial activities in public schools, as well as the laws and policies that regulate them. "Supporting Students or Selling Access?" (The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) highlights controversies sparked by commercialism in schools. "Captive Kids: A Report on Commercial Pressures on Kids at School" (Consumers Union Education Services) looks at what commercial sponsors are teaching kids in school. "Corporate Involvement in Schools: Time for a More Critical Look" (Alex Molnar) considers how the commercialization of public education may affect the larger civic culture. "Capturing the Eyeballs and 'E-Wallets' of Kids in School: Dot.com Invades Dot.edu" (Nancy Willard) examines electronic marketing in schools and offers guidelines for schools that do business with technology provides. Two related books recommended for elementary school principals are "Elementary School Principal's Handbook" (William Collison and Carol H. McAllister) and "The Elementary School Principal's Calendar: A Month-by-Month Planner for the School Year" (Robert Ricken, Michael Terc, and Ida Ayres). (RT)

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Research roundup

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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Commercialism in Schools

Kirstin Larson

Commercial activities in schools have increased dramatically in the last decade, and many predict they will continue to grow in frequency and variety. As schools with strained budgets struggle to meet ever-growing needs, many businesses are offering cash, equipment, and educational materials in exchange for the right to advertise or sell products to kids while they are in school.

The intense public controversy sparked by these deals has warranted a report by the U.S. General Accounting office and led to a number of recent attempts at regulation. Proponents view these interactions as symbiotic relationships that benefit both businesses and children. Critics view them as something more akin to mad cow disease, a plague that is spreading rapidly, undermining the ability of schools to control the curriculum, and eating away at the minds of children.

This issue of *Research Roundup* gives voice to the concerns raised by critics and supporters of commercialism in schools.

The U.S. General Accounting Office reports on the nature and frequency of commercial activities in public schools, as well as the laws and policies that regulate them.

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development highlights controversies sparked by commercialism in schools.

Consumers Union looks at what commercial sponsors are teaching kids in school.

Alex Molnar considers how the commercialization of public education may affect the larger civic culture.

Nancy Willard examines electronic marketing in schools and offers guidelines for schools that do business with technology providers.

Kirstin Larson is a research analyst and writer for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management at the University of Oregon.

U.S. General Accounting Office. **Commercial Activities in School.** GAO/HEHS-00-156. Washington, D.C.: Author, 2000. *Available from:* U.S. General Accounting Office, Box 37050, Washington, DC 20013. 202-512-6000. First copy free, additional copies $2 each. Available online at **www.gao.gov.**

This report responds to growing concerns over how students' behavior may be affected by advertising, product sales, and other commercial activities taking place in schools. At the time of the report, Congressional hearings had been held and legislation drafted (H.R. 2915, S.1908) to address the commercial exploitation of children and the need to protect students' privacy rights.

Over the last decade, the report says, commercial activities in public schools have increased in visibility and taken unprecedented forms, while subject to very little comprehensive or uniform regulation at the state and district levels. Businesses are eager to tap into the growing youth market, while schools are turning to businesses for resources such as cash and technology-related equipment and services.

Only five states have statutes or regulations that specifically and comprehensively address school-related commercial activities, while 14 states take a more piecemeal approach by restricting or even explicitly permitting specific activities.

The report identifies four distinct types of school-based commercialism:

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Product sales, which include arrangements with companies to sell their products in and to schools, as well as rebates and fund-raising programs;

Direct advertising, including ads in school publications and free product samples;

Indirect advertising, such as corporate-sponsored incentive programs, educational materials that display brand names, product samples, and corporate gifts; and

Market research, using questionnaires, taste tests, and online surveys.

Despite the growing visibility of school-based commercial activities, revenue from these activities represented only a tiny percentage of the budgets in the seven districts visited by researchers. In addition, the report notes, many of the activities "yield no tangible commercial benefit to the schools, although they do yield benefit to the advertiser."

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. **"Supporting Students or Selling Access?"** *ASCD Infobrief on Commercialism in Schools*, November 1998. *Available from:* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 800-933-2723. Available online at **www.ascd.org/readingroom/infobrief/9811.html.**

This article highlights arguments on both sides of the commercialism debate, with proponents lauding the financial windfall and critics deploring the exploitation of a young and captive audience. The division extends even to the terminology used to describe commercial arrangements between schools and businesses. Proponents often use the term "school-business partnership" to emphasize the mutually beneficial, cooperative nature of these arrangements. To illustrate the nature of such relationships, a Colorado school official cites posters that display corporate logos while encouraging students to stay in school.

Critics, however, think the term "school-business partnership" disguises the exploitative nature of many of these arrangements. They point out that corporations often sponsor activities to gain access to students during school hours, build credibility with them, cultivate them as present and future consumers, and shape their influence on their parents' purchasing.

A hot point in the debate is Channel One, a twelve-minute classroom news program that includes two minutes of commercials. Along with free television programming, Channel One provides technology to schools that agree to air the show regularly.

Supporters of Channel One defend its educational value and point out its popularity among students and teachers. Critics object to what they identify as the program's explicit advertising, dubious educational content, waste of costly instructional time, disproportionate presence in high-poverty areas, and its impact on students who mistake the commercials for public-service announcements.

The InfoBrief suggests that districts considering commercial agreements should enlist school and community participation in the decision, thoroughly assess the educational value of the agreement, and never require a school to take part in such an agreement.

Consumers Union Education Services. **Captive Kids: A Report on Commercial Pressures on Kids at School**. Yonkers, N.Y.: Consumers Union, 1995. *Available from:* Consumers Union of U.S., Inc., 101 Truman Avenue, Yonkers, NY 10703. 914-378-2000. Available online at **www.consumer.org/other/captivekids/index.htm.**

Schools across the country are allowing corporate sponsors to influence the curriculum and the lifelong purchasing habits of students, according to the Consumers Union.

The article reports that, along with more traditional curricular fare, many students are now learning why they should buy (or get their parents and neighbors to buy) certain brand-name products. They are also studying educational materials that present as fact corporate and industry opinions on social, environmental, and health issues.

In their review of 77 sponsored educational kits and packets, researchers found that the majority—including those endorsed by educational associations or produced by independent developers—were "commercial or highly commercial" despite the absence of advertising; that nearly 80 percent offered biased, incomplete, or self-serving information; and that a few contained "significant inaccuracies." Moreover, the report noted that the educational value of sponsored materials is often left to the discretion of teachers ill-equipped to assess their accuracy.

The report concludes that when educators expose students to in-school advertising and promotional materials, they implicitly endorse corporate sponsors, undermine students' ability to distinguish between factual accounts and promotional vehicles, and violate public trust.

To counteract this, the report recommends that:

About ERIC

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) is a national information system operated by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). The ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, one of 16 such units in the system, was established at the University of Oregon in 1966.

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Web site: http://eric.uoregon.edu

• The corporate sector publicly support appropriate school funding;
• The education community recognize that bringing commercial influences into schools is unethical regardless of the financial payoff;
• Parents teach their children to be media-literate and critically aware consumers; and
• Governments make corporations pay a fair share of school funding, while eliminating tax breaks for corporate contributions.

Molnar, Alex. "Corporate Involvement in Schools: Time for a More Critical Look." *State Education Standard* 2:1 (Spring 2001). *Available from:* National Association of State Boards of Education, 277 South Washington Street, Suite 100, Alexandria, VA 22314. 703-684-4000. Available online at **www.schoolcommercialism.org**.

Unsolicited materials developed by well-funded outside interests are flooding schools, which must use their own resources to evaluate the materials. The abundance of unscreened materials may weaken academic programs and undermine democratic control of the curriculum, warns a report by the National Education Association's Committee on Propaganda in the Schools—in 1929.

Molnar argues that these long-standing concerns over commercial influences in schools are even more urgent today, given the phenomenal rise in school-based commercial activities over the last decade. Since 1990, for example, press citations of sponsored educational materials increased by 1,875 percent, citations of exclusive contracts between schools and corporations increased 1,384 percent, and citations of privatization increased 3,206 percent. Of the eight categories Molnar researched, fundraising had the largest number of citations.

According to Molnar, corporate involvement in schools has interfered with the ability of schools to provide a sound education, promote the best interests of children, and foster "democratic civic values." Children in schools, he argues, are increasingly being approached as consumers rather than as learners and citizens. He cites, for example, ads and products that encourage kids to consume junk food and sodas, market research that exploits students and invades their privacy, and lack of public accountability on the part of education-management organizations.

While attempts have been made to regulate commercial activities at state and federal levels, many have failed. "Unfortunately," Molnar writes, "policymakers have devoted much less time to thinking through the constraints that may be necessary on corporate involvement in the schools than to considering ways to expand school-business partnerships."

Willard, Nancy. Capturing the Eyeballs and "E-Wallets" of Kids in School: Dot.com Invades Dot.edu. Eugene, Ore.: Center for Advanced Technology in Education, 2000. 541-346-3460. Available online at **neitzen.uoregon.edu/index.html**.

In exchange for technology resources, a growing number of schools are allowing businesses to collect personal information from students through online profiling and to expose students to targeted marketing.

According to Willard, director of the Center for Advanced Technology in Education at the University of Oregon, schools are participating in these exchanges without adequate assessment of their educational value, impact on students, or ethical implications. Unethical classroom activities may require students to disclose personal information to be used for marketing purposes, allow students' online behavior to be tracked without their knowledge, or permit this personal information to be distributed to other online businesses without the knowledge or consent of either students or their parents.

Willard warns that students who are encouraged to share personal information that will be used to manipulate their own behavior and the behavior of other students for commercial purposes "may fail to develop an understanding of the boundaries of personal privacy."

While no laws or regulations address these specific concerns over electronic marketing in schools, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act does seek to protect the general online privacy of children under 13. Willard notes, "If teachers are selecting sites for student research, the sites should first be analyzed for the quality, appropriateness, and

Commercialism in Schools: NAESP's Position

The 2001-2002 Platform of the National Association of Elementary School Principals takes the following position on commercialism in schools:

NAESP believes that principals should be aware of corporate marketing techniques that target children. Principals are urged to consider the seriousness of entering into agreements that can negatively impact children.

NAESP calls upon school principals nationwide to use extreme caution and professional discretion in maintaining a clear and distinct separation between commercial advertising, in any medium, and the learning programs in their schools.

NAESP recommends that school districts and principals assume a clearance role in ensuring that any commercial presentation is in harmony with the school's curriculum, mission, or goals.

suitability of the educational materials present on the site."

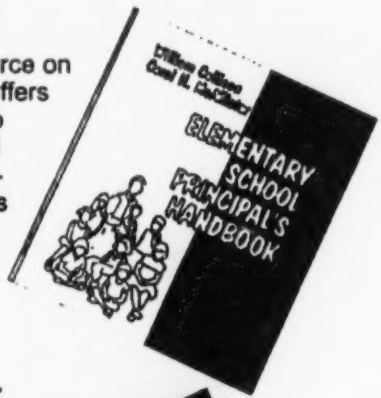
She recommends a set of principles for a school policy on Internet commercialism and identifies questions teachers should ask when considering student use of a particular Web site. These questions include:

- What information will be collected directly or indirectly from students using the site?
- What is the purpose of collecting the information?
- What security provisions have been established to ensure student confidentiality?
- What is the relationship between the collection of data and Web site advertising? □

Research Roundup is published four times during the school year by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Single copies: $2.50; bulk orders (10 or more): $2.00 ea. Virginia residents add 4.5% sales tax. Specify date and title of issue when ordering. Checks payable to NAESP must accompany order. Send to National Principals Resource Center, NAESP, 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314-3483.

Elementary School Principal's Handbook

by William Collison and Carol H. McAllister



For a new or aspiring elementary principal, this book is a valuable resource on those issues that become part of the reality of school administration. It offers advice, provides guidance on how to be successful, and tells you how to avoid the pitfalls that are out there waiting for principals. For the tenured principal, this book is exactly what he or she needs to chart a new direction. This handbook offers a wide range of relevant and up-to-date topics on all aspects of school administration.

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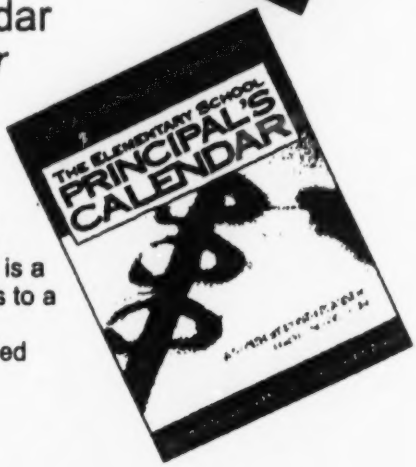
The Elementary School Principal's Calendar

A Month-by-Month Planner for the School Year

by Robert Ricken, Michael Terc, and Ida Ayres



Improve your organizational skills and discover an easy way to keep your school running. This book lays out everyday challenges and administrative necessities to help you plan strategically for the academic year. A handy monthly checklist and calendar helps busy administrators avoid reinventing the wheel each year. Also included is a rich resource of sample documents, from a summer letter to parents to a memo helping children cope with divorce. The Elementary School Principal's Calendar is an essential for principals faced with the varied tasks of school administration.

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